



# **The *Antipode* Graduate Student Scholarship 2007–2008 Winner**

## **Mobility, Migrancy and Globalisation: City-spaces in Kerala**

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Even a cursory investigation of the labour market in Kerala, South India would reveal the ever-increasing presence of migrant workers in different occupations in the state, ranging from hotel work and ironing clothes to laying telephone cables and constructing roads and buildings. Besides Tamils of the neighbouring state, there are workers from West Bengal, Bihar, Jharkhand, Orissa and Karnataka.

While there is a long and interesting history of migration from Tamil Nadu to Kerala, especially to the plantations, movement of workers from the north and the north-eastern states of India is a fairly recent phenomenon and is related to the increase in construction activity. I studied the movement of capital and labour to the urban infrastructure building in Kerala, focusing on the road construction sites in the city of Trivandrum managed by Punj-Lloyd Ltd, as part of my MPhil dissertation.

A close reading of the documents published by the World Bank and the Public Works Department and documentation of their everyday practices revealed that the movements of capital and labour which mediated the construction process take place against the backdrop of a changed institutional matrix where the rules of the game are drawn up by international lending agencies and consultancy companies. This involved a process of “creative destruction” (Brenner and Theodore 2002) of the state public works department by superseding the existing institutional framework rooted in developmentalism with new market-facilitating state institutions like Road Fund Board for coordination of construction activity, thus mobilizing the building of urban infrastructure as an arena of accumulation for global capital.

My fieldwork in the spaces of living and work brought to the fore a spatial organization of the labour camps reflecting ethnicity and the hierarchy at the work site which signifies a particular relationship between space and social relations. The identities of religion and caste mobilized in the recruitment process are structured over space in a particular way to reinforce and reiterate these identities, to be mobilized again at the work site through an elaborate supervisory structure.

My research intersected with issues of capital, labour, movement of ethnic communities and spatial movements thereof. It also touched upon aspects of the re-ordering of city spaces in the context of globalisation. Fieldwork in Trivandrum city made me aware of the rapid changes taking place in urban planning and development in Kerala. In my doctoral research I would want to explore new questions as well as incorporate and deepen my understanding of the questions I have researched so far.

The proposed study aims to situate migration to Kerala's urban infrastructure from north and north-eastern India in the context of changing city-spaces and the geography of capital accumulation. By connecting migration and the city, I intend to engage with the geography of accumulation which makes possible both the migration and the city. The study recognizes that globalisation presents a scenario which calls into question "migrant agency" as well as the "push-pull framework" in understanding even regional or sub-national migration. This requires a more spatially aware research which recognizes spatiality as an active element in understanding mobility and accumulation.

The study would fulfill the following three related objectives:

- To examine how capital deploys labour migration as a spatial strategy of accumulation in the reordering of city-spaces.
- To locate the movement of workers to the cities in Kerala in the context of globalisation and changing politico-institutional space.
- To trace the narratives of migration produced in this emergent economy of space.

Does the city bear marks of the geography of power which shapes processes of migration? In other words, is there some way to understand this geography by reading these marks in the city? The proposed research aims to engage with the relationship between changes in the city-spaces, processes of accumulation and the experience of migration.

The state views the construction of public infrastructure as indispensable in projecting cities in Kerala as a prime investment destination and in improving the quality of urban life. Urban planning and management are marshalled to re-imagine and re-order these smaller cities/towns as a "global city" where the existing urban form is considered as an obstacle to be removed. These attempts to re-order and re-imagine the city also

contain an idea of disorder and its meanings as it identifies certain groups and urban spatial forms as disorderly and irrelevant. Brook, Mooney and Pile (2000) note that notions of urban order and disorder are best understood as an elusive rhetorical formulation that mobilizes a range of representations about the conditions of cities around the world, but which also reflect both the power and social relations which are prevalent in cities. Paradoxically, “disorder” could also be the product of attempts to re-order the city in a specific way as these could bring in migrants and people of different ethnicities to the city-scape.

The proposed study considers the changing perceptions of urban infrastructure and planning and the rapid re-ordering of city-spaces in the era of globalisation as a crucial element in the interplay between migration and globalisation. Urban forms—roads, flyovers, underpasses, shopping malls, work sites and “labour camps”—need to be researched as spatial forms which not only mirror relations of production but are also active elements in the process of production and accumulation. Similarly, spatial narratives of migration—journeys, encounters with city-spaces and work—are taken as accounts that are capable of altering our understanding of mobility and migrancy.

A similar point was raised by Rogaly (2006) while examining the intensification of work place regimes in agriculture in UK and the role of migrant workers. He discusses the horticultural supply chains and the increasing concentration in retailer power and its implications for the labour process in agriculture, and calls for spatially aware, commodity-specific research with a strong ethnographic component.

Further, the experience of migration requires descriptive strategies which take into account the spatial narratives of movement—of journeys and cities. Labour migration in India in the post-liberalisation era, particularly to sites of infrastructure building, has been characterised by disparate journeys rather than circular movements to a specific place, say a factory or a mine as discussed by de Haan (1997). Papastergiadis (2000) notes that the motivation of settlement is no longer the central feature of the journey. While this observation is made in the context of the turbulent international migration, it nevertheless captures the characteristics of migration of workers to Kerala from other states. The stories of these journeys are to be read together with the narratives of the city-planning, “real estate and construction boom” and the building of public infrastructure.

I was really excited when I found out that I received the *Antipode* graduate scholarship. *Antipode*, though I have had only limited access to it, has alerted me to the possibility to practise academics in a way that need not compromise my active engagement with politics. The scholarship will help my fieldwork in the worksites and living quarters of the workers in Kerala and the villages in West Bengal and Bihar from where they come. I also plan to write articles in Malayalam, my

mother tongue, which would bring out the emergent economy of space that connects migration and the neoliberal city.

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